The World Health Organization (WHO) announced last week that processed meat causes cancer and red meat may as well - a difficult finding for a beef-loving state like Wyoming to accept. Drivers entering Wyoming via through Baggs are still greeted by sign reading: "Eat Wyoming Beef". The science is compelling, so what adjustments should we make?

This announcement comes on the heels of food writer Mark Bittman’s very persuasive presentation at Shift, concerning the consequences of large-scale food production. One memorable stat from his talk: if we all ate 20% less meat, the resulting effect on greenhouse gases would be comparable to driving a Prius. Meat has more of an impact on the environment than any other food we eat, because in comparison to plants, livestock require so much more food, water and land to raise and transport.

So maybe it is time we start to listen to some of this recent information. Let's put it into perspective.

The WHO defines processed meat as "meat that has been transformed through salting, curing, fermentation, smoking, or other processes to enhance flavor or improve preservation". So, we need to account for different ingredients used and produced in the processing.

*Salting or Curing meat*: Salt-curing or curing meat was traditionally done to preserve and prevent bacterial growth. Using salt alone is the traditional method, but adding nitrates/nitrites was introduced in the early 1900’s.

*Fermenting meats*: This method of preserves by using lactobacilli and sugar under a specific acid/alkaline and temperature environment for preservation. When adding chemicals that cause cancer, however, it becomes carcinogenic.

*Smoking meat*: In the smoking process, carcinogenic polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons are created. These substances increase the occurrence of colorectal cancers. Toxic sodium nitrate or nitrites are also used to smoke and preserve meats and are found in hot dogs, bacon, sandwich meats and salami.

The best choices for using processed meats would be to find meats that are only cured using salt and spices and avoiding smoked meats. Health food stores and specialty markets often have nitrate free bacon or sausage, prosciutto instead of speck, anddeli meats that are cured using salt sugar and spices.

While the WHO has lumped all of these foods together, I question if it is the smoke/polyaromatic hydrocarbons and nitrates/nitrites that are causing the cancer vs. the meat itself.

Which leads us to another question for the WHO. Is all meat likely to cause cancer? There’s no question Americans eat too much meat – over 12oz per day - especially the meat that comes from large-scale agriculture, but there is healthier meat out there.

There are farmers that raise cows in a humane way where they feed on grass and roam free, with significant results: Grass-fed meat has less saturated fat and greater levels of Omega 3 oils than grain-fed cows. They are not given antibiotics and growth hormones, which are passed directly to the consumer (you), when you eat them.

Review your diet - if you are eating meat three times a day, it’s time to make some changes. Start by eating a better quality red meat and do so less often. Investigate other sources of protein to make up the deficit like beans, cheese, tofu, beans, lentils, yogurt, nuts, and seeds. And yes, that elk you hunted is still red meat!

While lowering the amount of times that you eat red meat as a meal, you can also try using meat as an element of a dish, instead of the main course. Finding recipes like Brussels sprouts with nitrate free bacon, prosciutto added to a risotto or pasta dish, or Asian dishes where beef is mixed with vegetables will help you eat less meat without missing it so much. The healthiest diet in the world is the Mediterranean diet (Google it!), featuring little animal protein (meat,chicken,fish,eggs,cheese) and mostly vegetables.

These findings were a wake up call to me and should be a wake up call to you.